

# ***“THE HILL”***

**In**

# ***CRISIS***

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**A REPORT for**

**THE HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION OF EASTON**

*June 14, 2010*

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The Joint Opportunities Initiative

***With Photos by:*** Lin Layton



AFFORDABLE HOUSING COALITION OF TALBOT COUNTY  
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES  
LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

Historic District Commission  
% Town of Easton

June 14, 2010

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

Our report examines the physical character of this African American neighborhood known to the local natives as "The Hill." We have tried to distill those unique qualities that set it apart from the more affluent White neighborhoods that have been so thoroughly studied and documented throughout Easton's Historic District

Our focus on this particular neighborhood is driven by the following:

1. It was historically a socially viable and cohesive community that contributed significantly to the economic life of East End, since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.
2. The social and physical fabric of this community has broken down dramatically over the past 50 years. Were it to be revitalized to once again become a viable, safe community for working class families it could significantly improve the quality of life and boost the local economy.
3. Its physical size and location relative to the downtown make it an ideal demonstration project for us. We can apply a package of incentives and economic stimuli to reverse decay and dereliction, thus improving the welfare of the inhabitants and the town as a whole.
4. If successful we will have constructed a model program that can be applied to other neighborhoods and communities beyond Easton.

Were this neighborhood to be lost by neglect, or to be insensitively rebuilt in a way that erases its character and identity, we will have lost much more than just decayed siding and cracked windows. A significant record of our town's heritage can be read here.

Thank you;



Margaret M. Garey, Architect

**JOINT OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE**

A project sponsored by The Affordable Housing Coalition of Talbot Co.

**Project Site - “The Hill”**

**Four blocks (See Map A)**

North boundary	-	<b>South Lane</b>
South	“	<b>Talbot Street</b>
East	“	<b>Higgins Street</b>
West	“	<b>Aurora Street</b>

**South Street** bisects the area east to west  
**Locust Lane** “ “ “ north to south

**Historic Significance**

Our report examines the physical architectural characteristics of this historic African American neighborhood and attempts to distill those unique qualities that distinguish it from the more affluent White neighborhoods that have been so thoroughly studied and documented throughout Easton’s Historic District. What we encounter here is as much a record of our town’s history as the celebrated homes, shops and churches of the more affluent historic downtown.

Here is a community shaped by practical necessity with limited resources, and one that was confined geographically by an apartheid tradition. (Easton was never one homogeneous town) We see scaled back, stripped down versions of the structures and vernacular vocabulary seen elsewhere in our town. The story of “The Hill” is told by the rhythm and pattern of its structures not stylish details. It is this heritage we wish to preserve.

**Features**

**1. Scale and Massing**

**Lot size:**  
An examination of the lot lines (Map B) reveals the first major distinction. Lines shown in red denote traditionally White properties; those in blue traditionally African American properties. The blue lots are smaller and more irregular. In some instances building placement appears to totally disregard the lot lines. Odd lots crop up in the center of blocks. Over the years some of these lots have been assembled into larger parcels for housing projects. Missing housing units have left several open lots in stark contrast to the compressed clusters that still hug the sidewalks. Several fine old trees can be spotted as well.(See photos 7, 10, and 20)

**Structures:**

A sense of diminished scale predominates in this neighborhood compared to other historic sections of the town. Many of these houses hug sidewalks in tight rows, taking up all available space with scarcely a foot separating units. There is greater building density relative to open yards and streets. Few driveways cut between structures. There are no alleyways, only narrow through streets. Prevailing styles are either “railroad” (long and narrow with a gable facing the street) or “match box” (square with the gable perpendicular to the street). See Drawing, D-1, for contrast in house dimensions between 213 Brookletts Ave. and the Buffalo Soldier House on the corner of Higgins and South Streets. The Buffalo Soldier house measures approximately 12 feet (gable end) by 18 ½ feet (South Street front). By contrast, 213 Brookletts Ave. measures nearly 18 feet across the gable end. Photo 11 shows a typical railroad house on Locust Lane with a front dimension of 14 feet.

Second floor ceiling heights are frequently 7 feet or less, with window head and wall top plate being one and the same piece of lumber, thus producing a compressed appearance. The roof seems to droop over the second story windows. The result is a much lower building. Roof pitches tend to be generally shallower than those used in other traditional parts of town. (See photo 7)

The sense of reduced scale is further emphasized by the siding materials used. Standard dimensioned wood clapboards, 7 inch wood or asbestos shingles and various regularly sized synthetics when applied to smaller dwellings, tend to impart a dollhouse quality.

## **2. Pattern and Rhythm**

**“Railroad Houses”**

Lines of “railroad houses” present gable fronts that march soldier fashion to generate a regular saw tooth skyline. Many fronts have but one window above and one window below plus a door. (See photo 11) Porches jut predictably in succession giving us a repeating pattern of triangles either as hips or sides of shed roofs. The two-bay, three post, porch is ubiquitous. These rhythms and patterns tend to drown out minor differences such as a round turned porch post versus a square or metal one, or the occasional incidental bracket.

**“Match Box Houses”**

“Match box houses” stand eave to eave presenting a solid wall punctuated, with predictable precision, by two windows up and one down plus a door, reminding one of the black keys on a piano. A long ribbon of slanted roofs tilts away from the street at slightly less than 45 degrees to the horizontal. (See photos 5 and 18) Postage stamp porches are the norm here, many with benches and match stick railings. Some entry doors are capped by a single tab awning roof held up by two angled stick brackets. (See photo 5) Photo 9 shows the same repetitive theme with porches capped by small shallow gables supported on delicate square wood posts.



### **3. Notable details**

In this context of repetitive pattern, windows appear as one over one sash regardless of whether some have additional divided lites, or whether they are wood, metal or vinyl. Entry doors do not appear as prominent as windows, unlike the entry doors we see in more affluent historic neighborhoods. Such distinctions dissolve into the aggregate of the collective design pattern. Likewise, the different siding materials seem subservient to the uniform marching box shapes. Boxed eaves are almost non-existent. Window trim can be very wide relative to the sash unit or even missing altogether. Both can appear on the same house. (See photos 7, 11, and 15) Foundations are kept to a minimum. Few houses are more than two or three steps above grade.

### **Summary**

Collective repetition prevails everywhere. One has to speak collectively about these structures in graphic terms, not as single houses that can be distinguished by individual design elements. It is a community characterized by collective rhythms and repeated geometric patterns; one that begs to be viewed at a slight distance, not scrutinized too closely. It feels both dense and diminished in scale when one enters from any other part of town.

### **Potential role for Easton's HDC**

We think that the HDC Guidelines, as currently written, do not fully address our pilot neighborhood. This is not surprising since the area was not included in Easton's original Historic District Zone.

The HDC could take this opportunity to develop a new approach for these neighborhoods that will strengthen the town's historic fabric. Ideally we would like a modest set of clear instructions from the HDC that will leave little doubt or ambiguity concerning what a property owner in this type of neighborhood should expect when seeking approval for exterior construction. We would hope that our report could serve as background for such guidelines along with the input from residents and local property owners affected.

Our goal is to expedite and facilitate a process that can lead to the creation of a viable, safe, sustainable community for working class families; one that reflects our historic heritage and contributes to the economic well being of the entire town.

End Report





MAP A  
PILOT NEIGHBORHOOD  
"THE HILL"

Four block area inside red line  
Comprises JOI Project





## MAP B



PILOT NEIGHBORHOOD  
Lot Lines

-  African American Community
-  White Community





MAP C  
PILOT NEIGHBOHOOD  
Photo Key

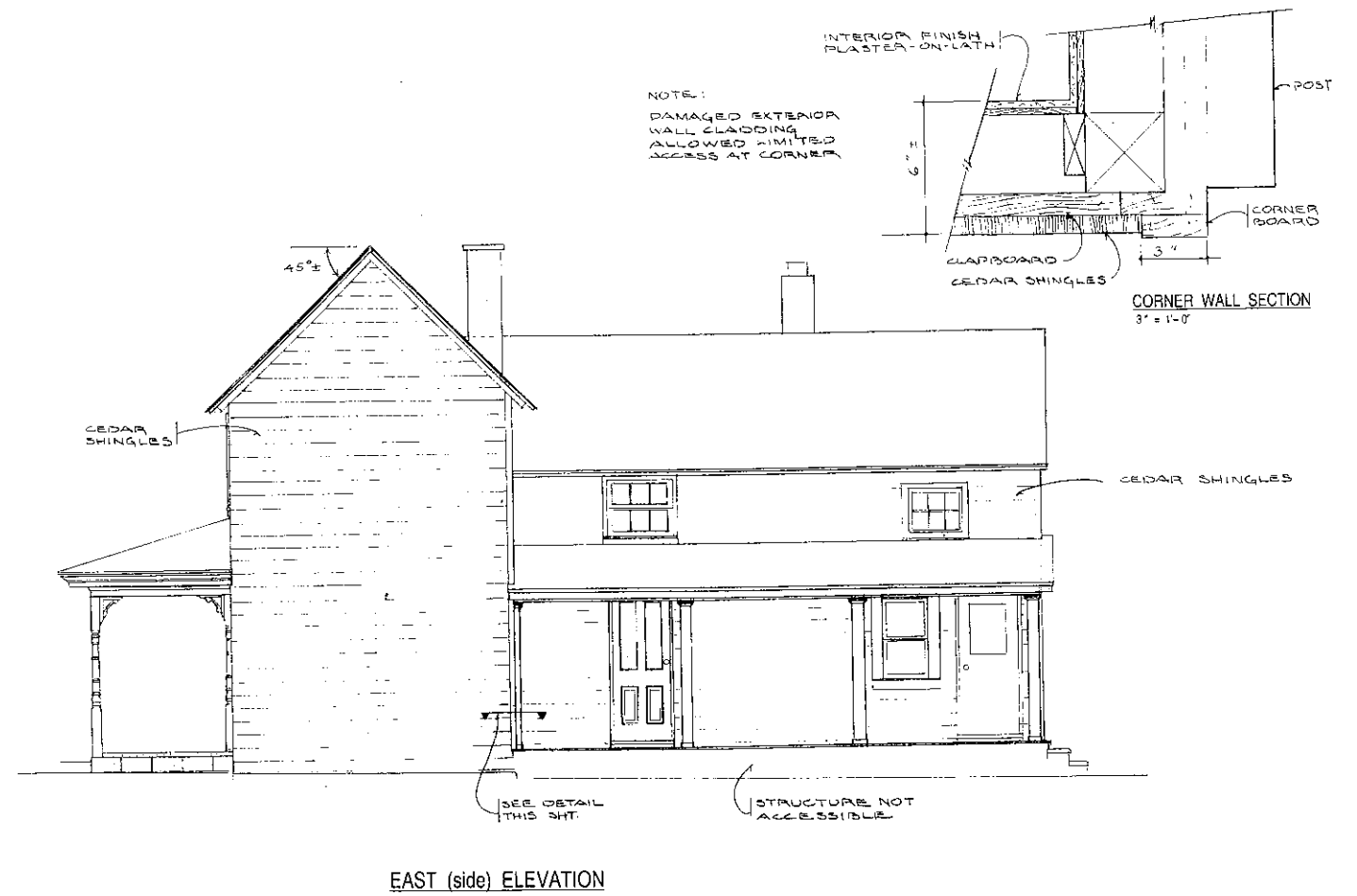
-  Photo number and view direction
-  Indicates accompanied by analysis sheet



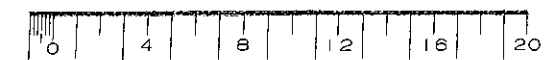


213 Brookletts Avenue  
(view from rear)

Exemplifies difference in scale between traditional White neighborhoods and Traditional African American neighborhoods.



Buffalo Soldier House  
South and Higgins Streets



SCALE: 1" = 8' - 0"

## NOTES

"Railroad" vernacular houses reported to have been built for White employees of the furniture factory that was located on Kemp Lane. This row is a segue into our neighborhood. See next page for graphic overlay and discussion.

AURORA STREET



Furniture Factory "Railroad" Houses



## NOTES

Repetitive triangles dominate. This collection of houses is characterized by a drum beat of 2-bay-3 post porches with two windows above. The windows on the 2nd floor are more graphically prominent than the one window plus entry door on the first floor. Compared to the African American portion of this neighborhood, here we see larger scaled houses, taller windows and slightly more refined details, such as boxed eaves across the front gable and flat soffits.

AURORA STREET



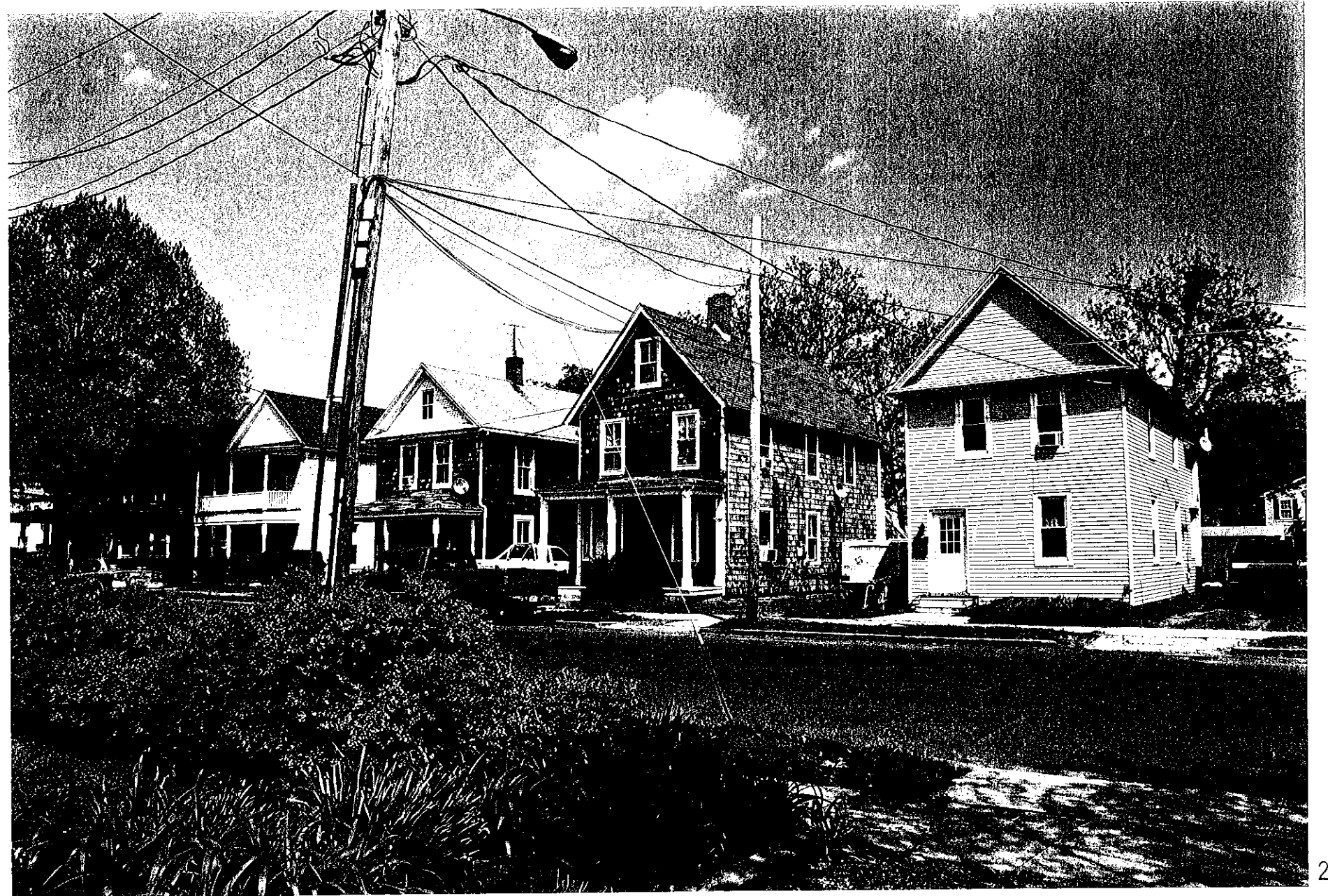
Furniture Factory "Railroad" Houses



## NOTES

Photos 2 and 3 show the many alterations that have occurred over time. These changes have not obscured the dominant rhythms, angles and massing themes.

AURORA STREET



Furniture Factory "Railroad" Houses



NOTES:

See NOTES for Photo 2.

AURORA STREET



Furniture Factory "Railroad" Houses



NOTES

Repetitive rhythms and roof lines continue in rear.



Furniture Factory "Railroad" Houses - rear view

AURORA STREET



NOTES

See next page with graphic overlay and discussion.

SOUTH LANE



"Match Box" Houses



## NOTES

### Dominant features:

- Postage stamp porches with repetitive shed roofs are supported on stick brackets. Stick hand railings and single plank benches flank porches.
- Windows are predictably spaced, one up, one down plus a door.
- Roof lines are compressed, and unboxed eaves drop below window heads.

SOUTH LANE



"Match Box" Houses



NOTES

Simple low roof lines and no architectural embellishment are typical characteristics.

HIGGINS STREET



"Match Box" House with rear addition and typical windows



NOTES

See next page for graphic overlay and discussion.

LOCUST LANE



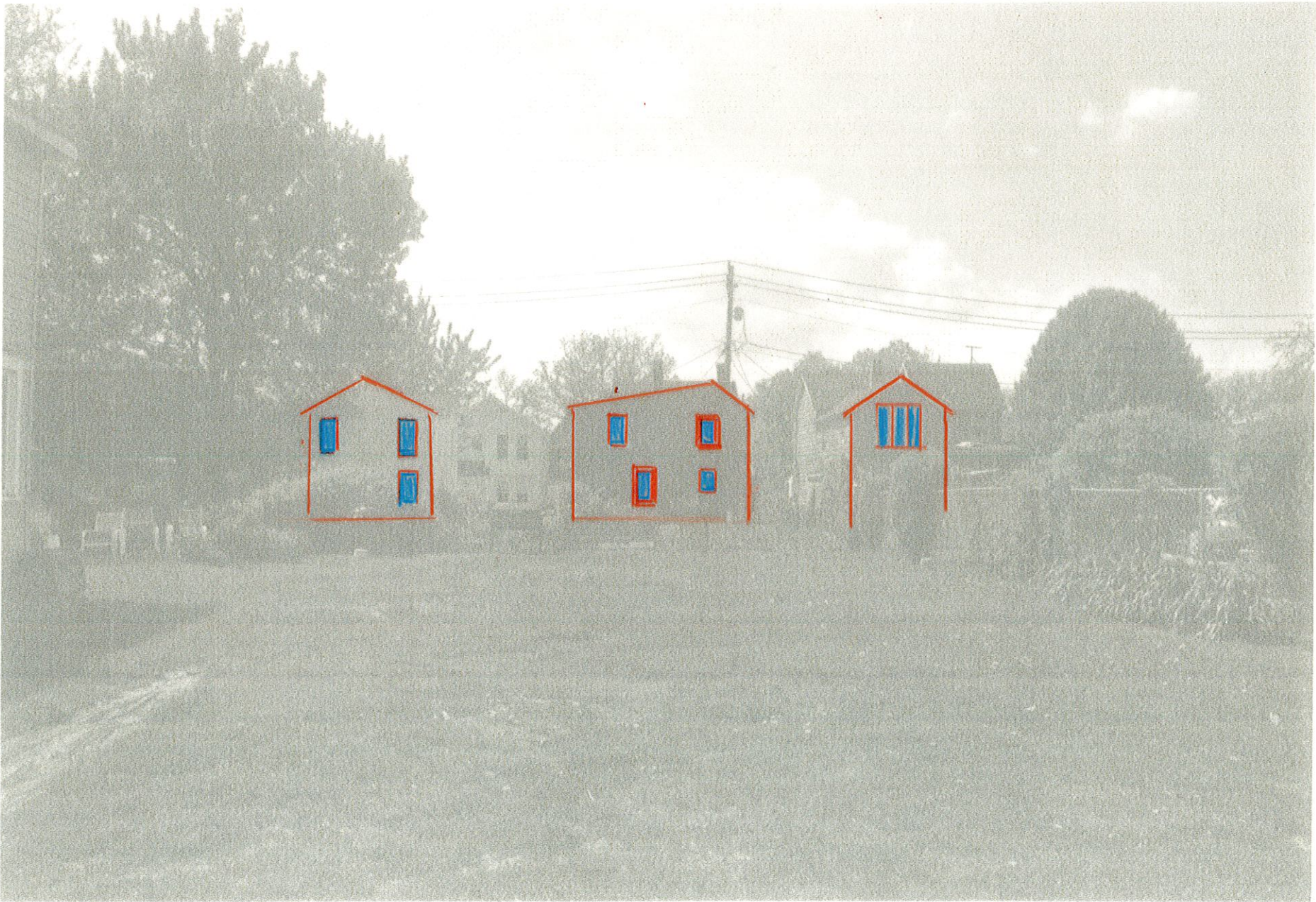
Vacant Lot with view of rear extensions on Locust Lane houses



NOTES

Rear appendages have even more compressed roof lines than front units. Window trims vary from non-existent to very wide. First floor levels are barely above grade.

LOCUST LANE



Vacant Lot with view of rear extensions on Locust Lane houses



NOTES

Same duplexes as shown in Photo 9

HIGGINS STREET



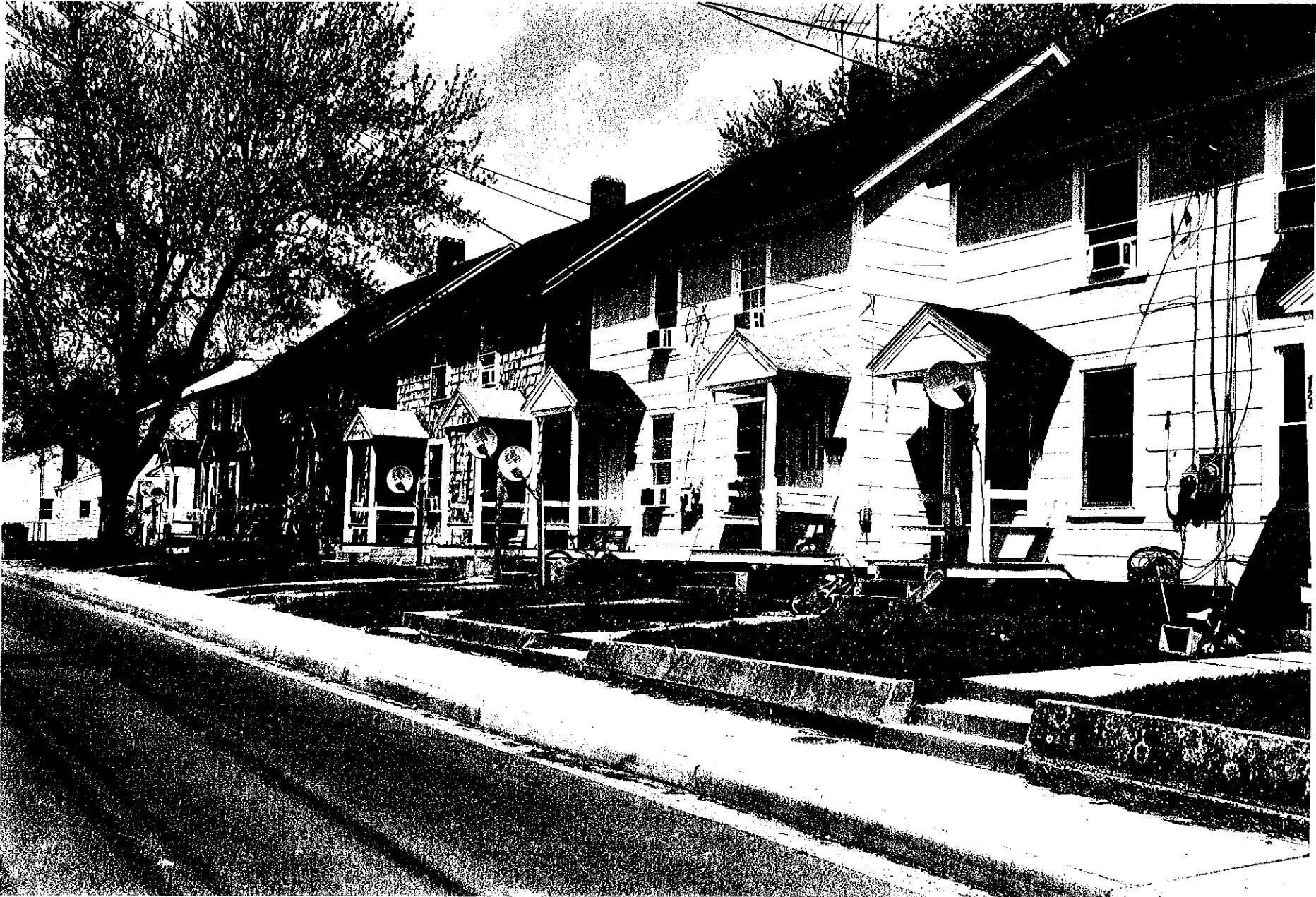
"Match Box" Duplexes



NOTES

See next page for graphic overlay and discussion.

HIGGINS STREET



"Match Box" Duplexes



## NOTES

Simple unadorned forms and rhythmical repeats:

- Roofs become repeating parallelograms that appear to form one contiguous ridge line
- Postage stamp porches with repeating gables and plank benches march evenly down the row of duplexes.
- Windows, two up and one down are in regular succession. Windows are graphically more significant than entry doors.
- Pathways and steps lead off regularly from the sidewalk.



"Match Box" Duplexes



NOTES

See Photo 7 for similar view of rear extensions.

TALBOT STREET



Back yard open space with large trees



NOTES

See next page for graphic overlay and discussion.

LOCUST LANE



"Railroad" Houses



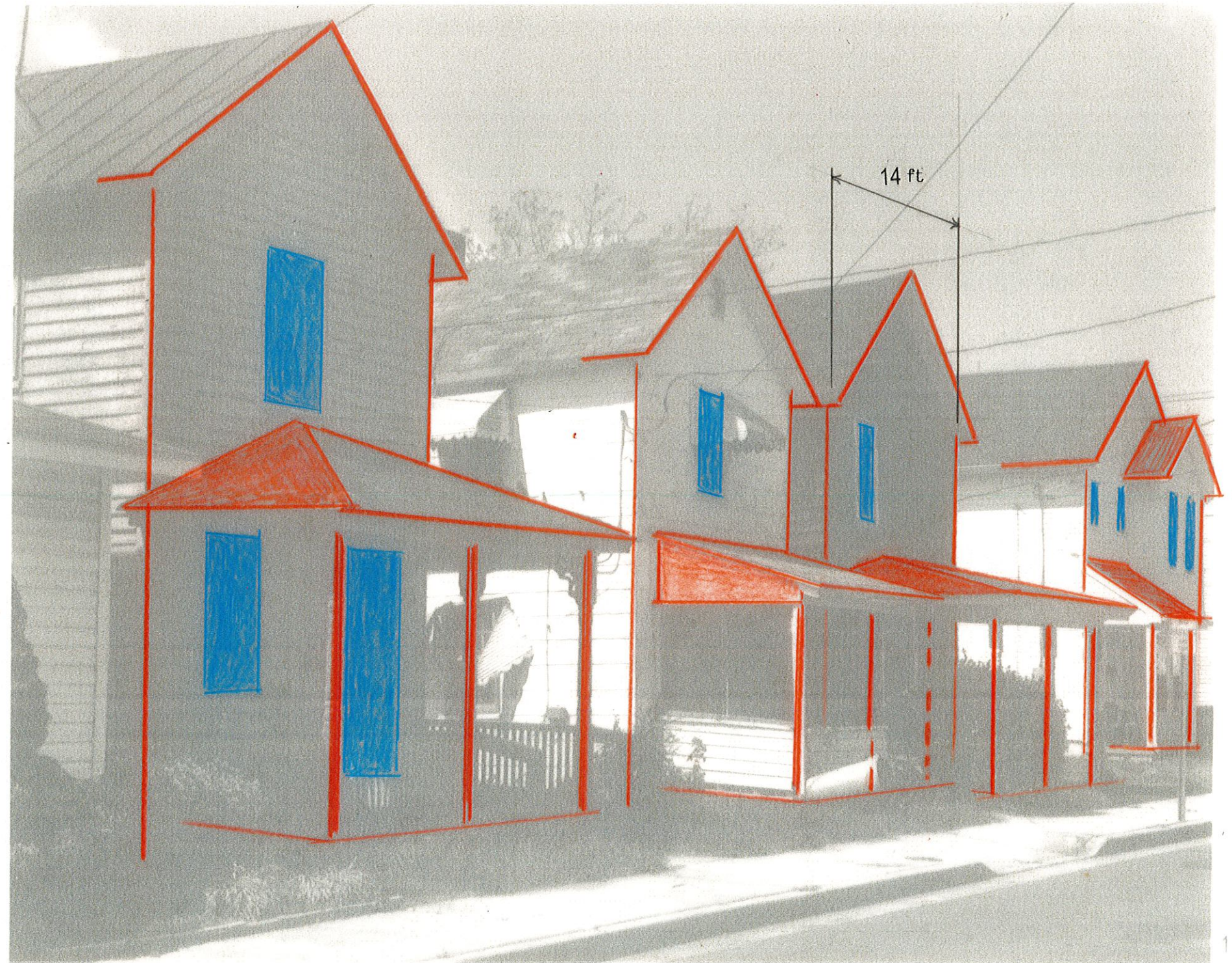
NOTES:

Dominant features:

- Unadorned gables repeat. Eaves remain unboxed.
- There is a repeating theme of one window up, one window down, plus door.
- Porches march along regularly, repeating a 2-bay-3 post pattern, capped by recurring triangular roof shapes.

Changes to the last house on the right (i.e. projecting box bay and postage stamp porch) do not effectively break the repeating patterns or graphic themes. These elements are merely proportional divisions within the dominant porch and gable façade form.

LOCUST LANE



"Railroad" Houses



## NOTES

The many varieties of exterior sheathing (original wood clapboards, asbestos shingles, wood shingles and synthetic siding) do not detract from the collective effect produced by repeating shapes and angles. These windows lack facing trim. Sash lite divisions are subordinate to the larger pattern of one-over-one.

LOCUST LANE



"Railroad" Houses - detail of Photo 11



## NOTES

Dominant features (house on right):

- First floor level is close to ground level.
- Compressed roof without boxed eave drops below top of second floor windows.
- Porch (2-bay-4 post) is in proportion to narrower "railroad" house porches.
- Window frames are not trimmed out.

Note the similarities with its neighbor to the left. These are more significant than any differences in siding or porch enclosure.

LOCUST LANE



"Match Box" Houses



NOTES

Modifications to the house in the foreground (such as synthetic siding, shutters and porch post embellishments) have not detracted from the rhythms or graphic patterns of the neighborhood. Note how similar the house in the foreground is to the dark shingled house in the background. All three houses pictured have wide window facing trim. They all appear to be only two steps above grade.

LOCUST LANE



Remodeled "Match Box" House



## NOTES

One might conclude that the excessively wide trim confers a degree of opulence on what would otherwise be a small, inexpensive window, making it appear bigger relative to the mass of the building.



Window with wide facing trim

LOCUST LANE



## NOTES

### Dominant features:

- Narrow streets, one way traffic.
- Small scale houses with little or no setback from the sidewalk.
- Shallow roof pitches. Gables generate a uniform "saw tooth" skyline.

## LOCUST LANE



Locust Lane viewed north from South Street



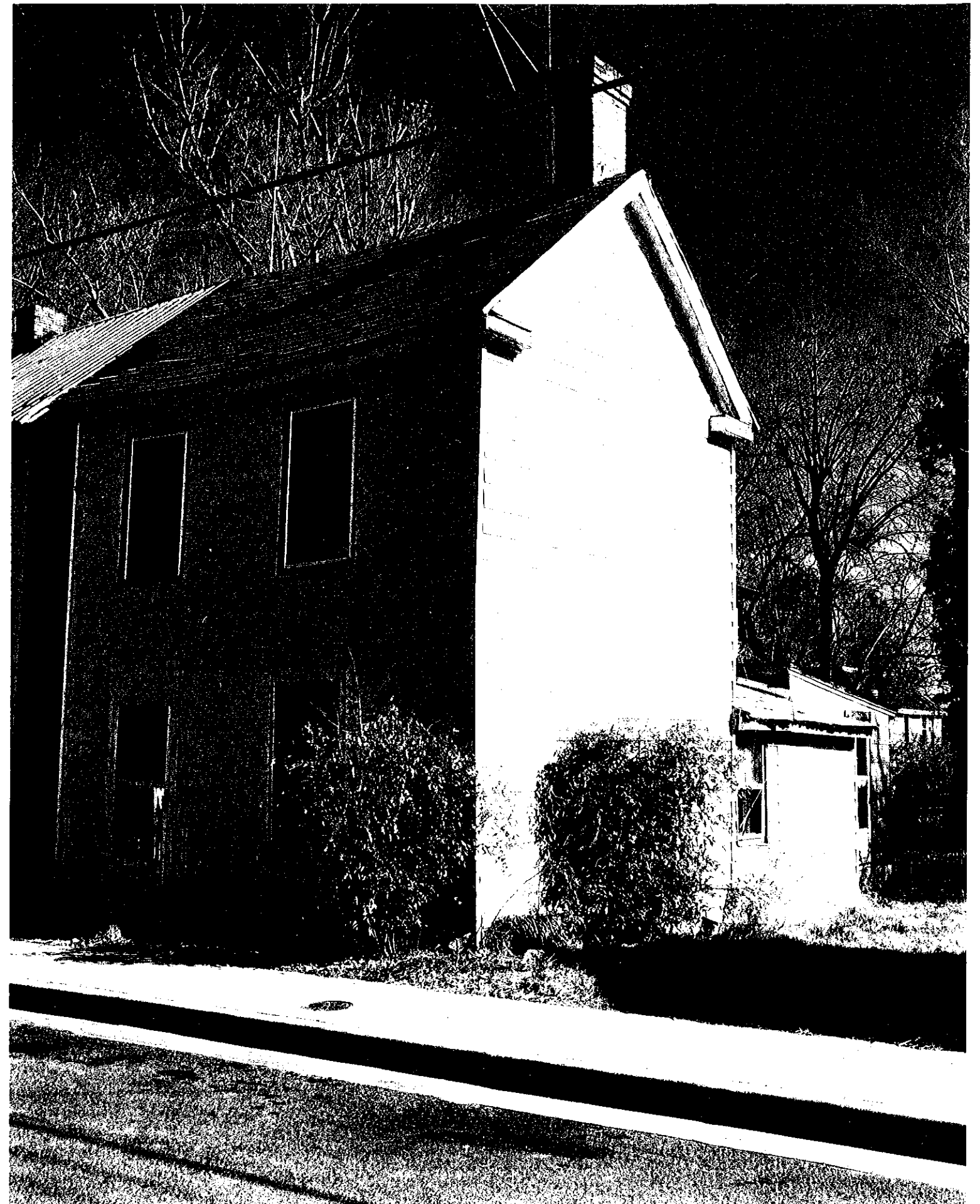
## NOTES

Dominant features:

- First floor is 1-2 steps above grade.
- Little to no setback from sidewalk and little space between houses.
- Windows regularly spaced, 2 up, 1 down plus door.
- Masonry chimney located in body of house at gable end.
- Tiny additions in rear.

Note that this house has the unusual features of a boxed eave with returns on the gable façade and flat soffits.

Also see notes on photo18



"Match Box" House



NOTES

See next page for graphic overlay and discussion

LOCUST LANE



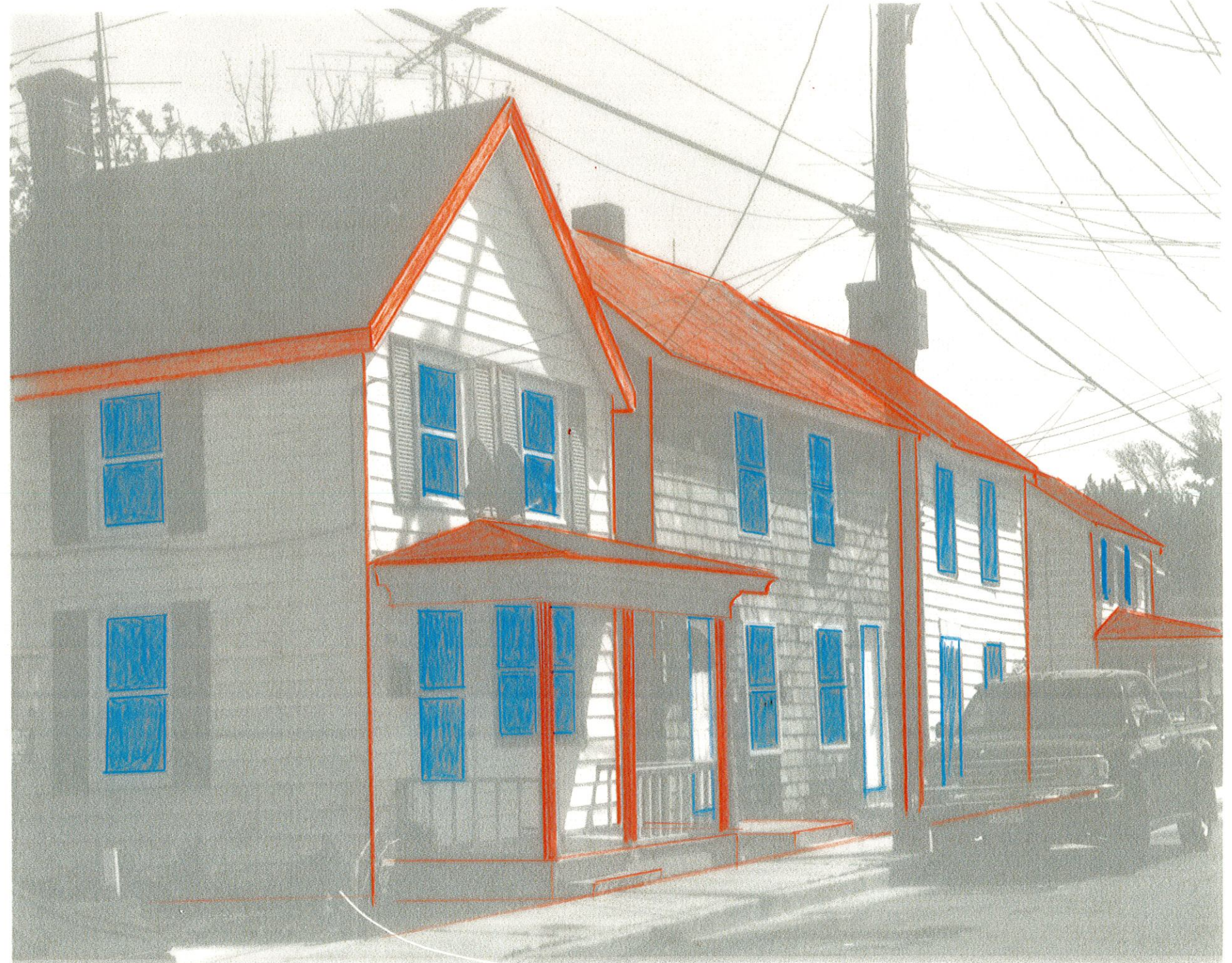
"Railroad" and "Match Box" Houses – typical streetscape



## NOTES

Typical streetscape. Both "railroad" and "match" box units are proportionally compatible and rhythmically in sync. All are close to grade level. Windows and doors appear predictably in repetitive order. (One might speculate whether or not the front doors ever had awning type roof covers.) Triangle theme appears again in the gable and porch roof shapes. Masonry chimneys are either built into the gable end or set in the center of each structure.

LOCUST LANE



"Railroad" and "Match Box" Houses – typical streetscape



NOTES

Typical streetscape. Note rhythm, reduced scale and flatter gable roofs. Despite the modifications made to the house in the foreground on the right, it maintains rhythmic continuity with the others, and carries on their porch eave lines. Its larger front windows seem well subordinated to the dominant themes of porches and roof lines seen along the street. Window sizes are sufficiently consistent with its neighbors to compensate for any apparent discrepancies. Even the second story projecting bay with its shed roof seems to flow in line with its neighbors eaves.

SOUTH STREET



View to southeast – typical streetscape



NOTES

Occasional vacant lots provide contrasting open green space with trees.

SOUTH STREET



Open space - view of backyards with trees



NOTES

Vacant lot adjacent to house offers open green space. See Photo 22 for commentary.

SOUTH STREET



"Buffalo Soldier House" and adjacent yard



NOTES

Typical “match box” themes appear in both houses.  
The “Buffalo Soldier House” on the right is an example of local vernacular being scaled back for practical reasons. The front entry hall does not have a stairway as we would expect to find in a more affluent dwelling. There was an existing stair in the rear section that predated the front addition. The stair hall, therefore, became just a foyer for the downstairs front parlor, with the second floor yielding two full bedrooms.

SOUTH STREET



“Buffalo Soldier House” and neighbor – typical “Match Box” vernacular



## NOTES

Example of vernacular "railroad" house scaled back.  
Windows are fewer and shorter. Note absence of windows on second floor in rear, and there are only two windows on the first floor.  
Boxed eaves with returns and flat soffits are the exception for this neighborhood. Interior masonry chimneys in rear and center of house can also be found in more affluent sections of town. Many of the houses in this neighborhood have only one masonry chimney.

SOUTH STREET



"Railroad" House viewed from the side



